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NIA (National Intelligence Academy)

Bugging School

To passers-by, the two-story concrete-and-glass building, fringed by palm trees and a neatly landscaped lawn, seems no different from scores of other private business facilities in Fort Lauderdale. But once inside, visitors are immediately confronted by a blunt sign on the receptionist's desk. It reads: "U.S. Government regulations prohibit any discussion of this organization or this facility. Sorry, the receptionist is instructed not to answer related inquiries."

The subject of these strictures is a professedly private school called the National Intelligence Academy (NIA), and its avowed function is to teach advanced electronic-surveillance techniques to qualified police officers and other law officials, in or out of uniform. Just why the receptionist's sign tries to invoke the authority of the U.S. Government is but one of a number of puzzlements about the place—particularly since everyone from NIA director Ronald Stanley on down is emphatic in denying that the outfit has any connection, financial or otherwise, with Washington. Stanley himself sloughs off most inquiries. "We'd just as soon that articles about us never appear," he says, "but we can live with it."

In the past sixteen months, the NIA has taught the sophisticated skills of electronic spying to police officers—many of them undercover agents—from 25 states and at least two foreign nations. In a grueling two-week course, the lawmen learn about magnetic tape, transmitters and receivers. They study the use of "body bugs" and the many applications of night-vision devices. They learn how to adjust an antenna so that intervening buildings don't blur their listening devices and how long a battery will last under varying weather conditions. They are given five minutes to bug a room secretly—while instructors monitor them by closed-circuit television.

Boost: Except for the $760 tuition paid by the students' sponsors, no government funds support this unique program—at least so far as anyone knows. The NIA's financial backing comes from a nonprofit foundation controlled by Leo Goodwin, 57, the multimillionaire heir to an enormous insurance company fortune. A former Army parachute instructor who shuffles around his 25-room Fort Lauderdale mansion in slippers to ease the strain on his jump-scarred feet, Goodwin is a cop buff who recently told an interviewer: "The whole country is on the verge of anarchy . . . I just felt that law enforcement needed a boost and I am doing what I can in my own small way to assist them."

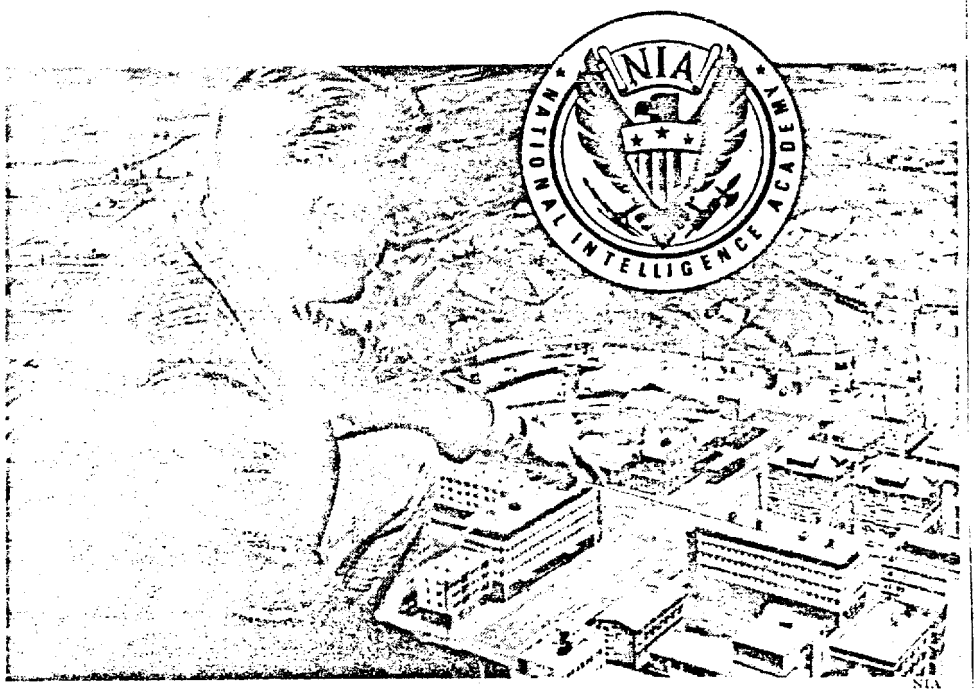
Goodwin's assistance has amounted to at least $3 million over a three-year period for a school whose annual operating budget is estimated at one-sixth that amount. A million-dollar beachfront hotel was purchased to accommodate the visiting police students. Goodwin's foundation has also paid for NIA's headquarters, which will include a 20- by 12-foot miniature city, complete with buildings, trees, cars and people, so that surveillance tactics and techniques can be demonstrated in three-dimensional fashion. The building is equipped with all the latest gadgetry in electronic spying equipment—most of which happens to be manufactured by an outfit called Audio Intelligence Devices (AID), a company that has its own headquarters in the same building with NIA.

AID is owned by an interesting figure named Jack Holcomb. NIA director Stanley denies any financial ties between the nonprofit academy and the manufacturer, but the police students are regularly offered tours of the AID plant, and since the police learn electronic surveillance almost exclusively with AID equipment, many of them may buy it for their departments when they go home.

Intrigue: Despite these disavowals, AID president Holcomb does serve the NIA as a "special consultant." Holcomb, 47, chews through 25 cigars a day and seems to keep two secretaries and an electronic paper shredder busy throughout his working hours. He was once thrown out of Anguilla by British officials who accused him of nefarious business dealings with rebel authorities. He was later asked to leave Haiti by authorities who accused him of being a U.S. agent. "Intrigue gets in your bloodstream like a narcotic," says Holcomb. "Once you get a taste of it, you want more." Holcomb has been variously allied with U.S. law and against it. He has publicly boasted of being contacted by the FBI to handle "anything the Feds wouldn't touch." His [illegible] arrests, for barbiturate possession (charge dropped), wiretapping (acquittal) and nonsupport of a minor child (conviction). He now pays support but denies the child is his.

Holcomb and Goodwin apparently first met in the 1960s, and their relationship blossomed quickly. Holcomb advised Goodwin on the organization of NIA in 1972, beginning with a staff of veteran government investigators, including an old hand from the Central Intelligence Agency. Recently, many original instructors left NIA in a cross fire of recrimination. They accused Holcomb of using the school to boost AID sales; he accused them of planning courses on such illegal tactics as lock-picking.

Suspicious of Holcomb's foreign expe-



Stanley and model of NIA's surveillance city: No questions, please

riences, some people are now hinting that the NIA may actually be designed to provide international security training on behalf of the CIA, a charge that both director Stanley and U.S. Government officials regularly deny. So far, the only foreign police known to have trained at NIA have come from Canada and Venezuela. But Stanley reports with some pride that six foreign nations have inquired about enrolling their police and that on one occasion, a group of touring foreign dignitaries was escorted to the school by Secret Service agents.

Skills: Many graduates have high praise for NIA. Sgt. Lenny Angello, technical chief of the sheriff's organized-crime unit in Reno, Nev., calls NIA "the finest school of its type I have ever attended." Stanley contends that it fills a specialized need in law enforcement, much like the Traffic Institute at Northwestern University. "If a police officer is trained in surveillance skills," he says,

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"he is not only less likely to make a mistake, but less likely to abuse the law." The first subject in NIA's curriculum, in fact, is a thorough look at wiretap regulations, and the continuing theme of the whole course is how to bug citizens without violating the law.

—JERROLD K. FOOTLICK with WILLIAM SCHMIDT in Fort Lauderdale